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A Culinary History of Myrtle Beach and the Grand Strand: Fish & Grits, Oyster Roasts and Boiled Peanuts by Becky Billingsley

Jason K. Alston
University of South Carolina

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Abstract

Review of *A Culinary History of Myrtle Beach and the Grand Strand: Fish & Grits, Oyster Roasts and Boiled Peanuts* by Becky Billingsley.

Keywords

book review, A Culinary History of Myrtle Beach, Becky Billingsley (author)

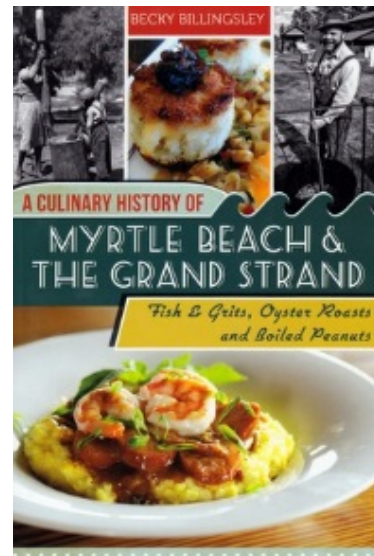


BOOK REVIEW

A Culinary History of Myrtle Beach and the Grand Strand: Fish & Grits, Oyster Roasts and Boiled Peanuts by Becky Billingsley
American Palate, 2013. \$17.

With *A Culinary History of Myrtle Beach and the Grand Strand*, Billingsley – a longtime writer on coastal South Carolina dining – seeks to illustrate how the intertwining of Native American, European and African culinary practices along the South Carolina shore spawned the unique cookery tradition celebrated in modern-day Horry and Georgetown counties. Billingsley accomplishes this by abandoning the straight chronological narrative approach. Instead, she provides some contextual historical groundwork of the three primary cultures. Billingsley then uses much of the rest of the book to convey how interaction between these cultures resulted in today's highly-acclaimed South Carolina oceanfront cuisine. During the historical journey, readers also learn of the practical and humble origins of many foods now considered delicacies.

Culinary History begins with a foreword from Waccamaw chief Harold "Buster" Hatcher. Hatcher's foreword leads seamlessly into the introduction and first three chapters, which concentrate on the dietary and cultural history of the region's Native, European and African populations. After Billingsley provides background for the culinary practices and motivations of these groups, she spends most of the book bringing the three groups and their dietary practices together. During the historical narrative, Billingsley shares the origins of such coastal staples as Hoppin John and the "Carolina method" for preparing rice, one of the region's most prevalent and important foods. Barbecue, sweet potatoes and duck all get their important and interesting mentions in the book's core. Billingsley even shares details on what President George Washington enjoyed eating – and drinking – during a stay in South Carolina.



The final seven chapters of this work shift the focus from the people of the region to several of the foods themselves, giving a concise overview of their history and preparation tactics. Boiled

and parched peanuts, shrimp and grits, and pinesap potatoes are among the foods worthy of full chapter coverage, while foods like alligator, crab and fruitcake get lesser mentions within concluding chapters. There is also a list of "heritage restaurants".

After covering the coast's culinary tradition for years, it is apparent that Billingsley knows the subject matter and presents it descriptively. *Culinary History* never lacks detail. Billingsley explains not just what was done as far as food preparation and serving along the coast, but who did it and why it was done. Billingsley makes use of quotes to set the work's tone, but her journalistic background shines through as she avoids verbosity; the book is therefore not tedious. Billingsley also punctuates many chapters with recipes relevant to the subject matter.

Billingsley clearly presents as exhaustive a narrative as she can, though some chapters feel incomplete, especially the brief chapter covering the Civil War. Billingsley's lack of actual transition from contemporary times to the chapters focused on specific foods also gives the chronological flow an abrupt and unsatisfying ending.

Culinary History however does what it seeks to do well, and that is inform the reader of the rich

history of farming, hunting, and dining along the coast. All libraries in or near Horry and Georgetown counties should carry this title, and libraries with South Carolina-specific collections should also carry this title. Culinary programs should also consider this work. While *Culinary History* is clearly written for an adult audience, young adults finishing reports on state history or cuisine will find this an easy-to-use source for their work.

Jason Kelly Alston is a doctoral student at the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina